



Citizens Building a Better Washington

Growth Management Act

Ensuring Washington's economic and environmental vitality through citizen planning



GMA Today

Under the Growth Management Act (GMA), local governments plan for 20 years of growth. Their comprehensive plans include chapters on land use, housing, capital facilities, transportation, utilities, shorelines, and rural areas (for counties). They may also include chapters on economic development, parks and recreation, energy, or the environment. The plans are carried out by development regulations, such as zoning and land division codes. If the plans and regulations are inconsistent or don't comply with the GMA, citizens, other local governments, or state agencies can challenge them before a growth management hearings board. Three regional growth management hearings boards resolve GMA compliance disputes.

Once fully-planning communities have adopted comprehensive plans, they are required to review and adjust them, as needed, every seven years. King, Pierce, Snohomish, Kitsap, Clark, and Thurston counties also work under the Buildable Lands Program, a review and evaluation system that ensures they have enough land for development.



To help pay for the costs of providing services to new growth, the GMA authorizes local governments to impose excise taxes for capital improvements and impact fees for streets, open space, parks and recreation, school facilities, and fire protection.

Growth Management Works

Currently, 29 counties and 218 cities – representing 95 percent of the state's population – are fully planning under the GMA. Ten counties and their cities are planning for resource lands and critical areas only. Nearly all local governments required to prepare comprehensive plans have completed their first plans under the act and are beginning to see initial results:

- Many communities are revitalizing their downtowns with attractive, compact development.
- Communities are planning for economic development to draw new businesses to their areas, while protecting the environment.
- Open space and recreation opportunities are being enhanced.
- Transportation policies are being examined and better ways are being sought to handle congestion and foster alternatives to the single-occupancy vehicle.

- Farms and forestlands have been designated.
- Historic buildings are being preserved.
- Smaller local communities are deciding how to provide public services, such as water and sewers, for growing populations.

Most importantly, citizens are participating in planning for the future of their communities.

Fact

The state has added 1 million people since the GMA was passed and expects to add about another 1.5 million by 2020.



Preserving Quality of Life

In 1990, the GMA was passed because Washington was growing rapidly, and in many areas, the quality of life that has made the state such a desirable place to live was swiftly disappearing. Legislators created the act to enlist citizens, communities, local governments, and the private sector to cooperate and coordinate with one another in comprehensive land use planning.

Under the GMA, all counties designate and conserve natural resource lands, such as farmlands, and designate and protect critical areas such as wetlands. They also plan for future residential development and their public services and facilities needs. The state's fastest growing counties and their cities – called “fully-planning communities,” prepare comprehensive plans that provide for future growth without sacrificing the livability of their communities. Many smaller counties have opted to be fully-planning communities as well.

The intent of the GMA is to guide Washington's communities in assessing their goals and developing plans to carry them out. The act has been amended to be more efficient and integrated. For example, shoreline management plans and the level of service standards for state-owned transportation facilities now need to be incorporated into the comprehensive plans.

Creating Common Goals

GMA plans and regulations are to be guided by 14 goals:

- Focus urban growth in urban areas
- Reduce sprawl
- Provide efficient transportation
- Encourage affordable housing
- Encourage sustainable economic development
- Protect property rights
- Process permits in a timely and fair manner
- Maintain and enhance natural resource-based industries
- Retain open space and habitat areas and develop recreation opportunities
- Protect the environment
- Encourage citizen participation and regional coordination
- Ensure adequate public facilities and services
- Preserve important historic resources
- Manage shorelines wisely

For More Information

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